

Maximize Discretionary Effort

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Every day when people go to work in organizations, they give effort to further the cause of the group. That is about as much as we can say for the general population. The amount of effort as a percentage of what is available varies greatly from one person to another and from one organization to another. The effort for one particular person also varies significantly from one point in time to another.

Each of us has a vast storehouse of “discretionary” effort that we either give or withhold on a daily basis. Let’s examine the factors that govern why some people freely choose to give a lot more of their discretionary effort to their organization while others, equally qualified, habitually hold back most of their potential.

Of course, it has to do with motivation. On any given day, some of are motivated to go above and beyond the requirements and others are turned off. Can you imagine the power if there was a way to have most people in the organization fully engaged in the work most of the time? The result would be a huge productivity improvement for any organization.

The interesting thing to me is that the formula for giving maximum discretionary effort is different for each of us. No two people are completely alike, although there are many things that universally turn people off, the formula for turning an individual on is personal. What follows is a method to discover your key to maximum discretionary effort.

First, visualize a time in your life when you performed at a peak level for an extended period of time of your own free will. Remember the circumstances by which you compelled yourself to put forth incredible effort, often with little rest or breaks. Try to identify what it was in that set of circumstances that enabled you to perform at that level. Here are some examples of what people have thought of for this exercise:

- I had to do it because it needed to be done, and I was the only one that could do it.
- It was a huge challenge; I was told it was impossible.
- I felt empowered; finally I was cut loose to do it my way.
- It was just important for me to get this done.
- I was aspiring to prove something to myself.
- I had to show them what I was made of.
- It was do or die, so I did.

- My team believed in me, so I had to do it.
- I understood the goal and it was important to me.

Keep working at it until you have identified the true essence of what enabled you to perform at that level. Write it down in one single sentence.

The sentence you wrote will be your personal specification for giving your maximum discretionary effort. Many times in life you can configure work to align with this kind of statement. When you do, you will instinctively be performing with at least twice the productivity of your usual pace.

The beauty of this simple exercise comes when you do it as a group activity. I recall one meeting where I had a corporate Vice President with his whole team, and we did this exercise. It turns out the VP was most energized when he had to parachute into the jungle with a knife between his teeth. His subordinates were turned on when they were trusted and empowered to get things done in their own way. The ensuing discussion revealed why there had been so much tension in the organization. Subsequent retraining of the VP led to much higher performance among his direct reports.

You can do this experiment at any level in the organization. Not only will it help you understand yourself better, it will also give you new insight into how to lead your employees.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book, **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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